THE CEYLON PRESS HISTORY OF SRI LANKA 6

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Sri Lanka & The Double Windfall

DAVID SWARBRICK

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DAVID SWARBRICK
& The Editors of The Ceylon Press

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“It’s always tea time.”

The Cheshire Cat,
Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,
Lewis Carroll.
1865.

ONE

Nearer to Heaven

In the previous 100 years Sri Lanka's little Vijayan kingdom twice risked absolute oblivion, courtesy of its carefree kings.

But twice too, in the following 170 years, the self-same state would step up, and prosper beyond all expectations, thanks to two other kings, both innate masters of nation building.

For Pandu Kabhaya, and his grandson, Devanampiya Tissa, were to set the mark way beyond what any other island leader might later hope to achieve and, in the rarified world of royal hustings, emerge as the nation's two greatest monarchs by a country mile,

Like the prize ride in a fairground big dipper, that such a double-double whammy should even have happened is about as rare as throwing a dozen sixes in Monte Carlo.

But little else should be expected of the Vijayans, the luckiest of all the dynasties, for whom every cloud had not one, but several, silver and gold, linings.

"The teeth of the dog that barks at the lucky man," avowed a somewhat orthodontist-orientated Singhala folk saying, "will fall out".

If true, then over the reigns of Pandu Kabhaya (437 - 367 BCE) and Devanampiya Tissa (307 - 267 BCE), the island's dogs would have been on a strict milk-and-roti diet, to better manage their missing molars.

Over this period, the tiny Vijayan state was radically expanded, endowed with a magnificent capital city (Anuradhapura); distinct laws; civil and administrative infrastructure; investments in agriculture and water harvesting; increased trade; and a new language – the earliest inscriptions in Sinhalese date from close to this period. And, most critically of all, a new religion – Buddhism. The subtle and profound chemistry between these manifold factors were to combine to create, like the rarest of new life in a petri dish, not just the world's only Singhala state; but one that would still be flourishing, despite all manner of catastrophes encountered along the way, today.

Pandu Kabhaya's (improbably long) 70-year reign (437 to 367 BCE) would have come as a blessed relief to family and subjects alike after so much earlier dynastic squabbling. Having outsmarted, out-manoeuvred, foiled, defeated, imprisoned, and killed nearly all his troublesome uncles, he took up his place as victorious head of the fledgling Vijayan dynasty and set in train the real beginnings of the Anuradhapura Kingdom when he made his home in the future capital and, in Louis XIV-style, began building.

By then the site of Anuradhapura was already some 200 years old and covered over 20 acres. Pandu Kabhaya took it to still greater heights for what followed was, to paraphrase Deborah Kerr and Carey Grant many centuries later, "the nearest thing to heaven".

In all areas of enterprise - from farming and engineering to administration and construction, his rule harnessed the best available expertise to build a capital with the hugest of hearts, and through it, dominate an entire island.

In the style of the much later and far away William the Conqueror and Doomsday Book, this king too commissioned a massive survey to take full stock of his domain – all the better the tax and manage it, plan investments, patronage, defence and yet further ascendency. A later medieval record from just one location – Kurunegala – states that the king formed 1,000 new villages in the area, his grandson later despatching pedigree Indian buffalos to graze there.

Even allowing for the exaggeration of breathless flunkies; even knocking one zero off the total, it still amounts to colossal development. Some thirty men were appointed in this area alone to be at the king's specific executive command, overseen by one Alakeswara Mudiyanse, a man whose name alone has survived these many hundreds of years.

TWO

Lord of Lanka

From Anuradhapura right across the Rajarata – the King's country – and quite probably beyond, the royal writ ran.

It encompassed old settlements and new ones too, exacting a political and social domination that would have placed the kingdom at the apogee of the other competing island societies that co-existed with it, for a time at least, and especially to the east and south.

In what was most probably something of a first for the Vijayan state, Pandu Kabhaya's rule respected his Vedda allies, the Yakkhas, Cittaraja and Kalavela, clans of the island's earliest original inhabitants. They had, after all, most likely been keen and critical allies in his fight against his many uncles. Now was the time for reward.

The Mahavamsa records his beneficial diligence: ""He settled the Yakkha Kalavela on the east side of the city, the Yakkha Cittaraja at the lower end of the Abhayatank...and on festival-days he sat with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him, the king took his pleasure, in joyous and merry wise."

Few areas of urban development escaped his planners' eyes and The Mahavamsa elaborates that "he laid out four suburbs as well as the Abhaya-tank, the common cemetery, the place of execution, and the chapel of the Queens of the West, the banyan-tree of Vessavana and the Palmyra-palm of the Demon of Maladies, the ground set apart for the Yonas and the house of the Great Sacrifice".

Cities need public servants – and here too Pandu Kabhaya seems to have missed nothing: "he set 500 candalas [low caste workers] to the work of cleaning the town, 200 candalas to the work of cleaning the sewers, 150 candalas he employed to bear the dead and as many candalas to be watchers in the cemetery.

And public servants, however low caste, needed homes: "For these he built a village north-west of the cemetery and they continually carried out their duty as it was appointed. Toward the north-east of the candala-village he made the cemetery, called the Lower Cemetery, for the candala folk. North of this cemetery, between (it and) the Pasana-mountain, the line of huts for the huntsmen were built thenceforth."

God too, in his many different iterations, was also provided for.

"Northward from thence, as far as the Gamani-tank, a hermitage was made for many ascetics; eastward of that same cemetery the ruler built a house for the nigantha Jotiya. In that same region dwelt the nigantha named Giri and many ascetics of various heretical sects. And there the lord of the land built also a chapel for the nigantha Kumbhanda. Toward the west from thence and eastward of the street of the huntsmen lived five hundred families of heretical beliefs. "

Trade thrived exponentially; and there are even intriguing hints, documented by The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka, of a small group of Greek merchants later living in the royal city itself.

Nor did he appear to neglect the utilitarian, and, in a marvellous feat of ancient engineering, constructed the first bisokotuwas to regulate the outflow of water from tanks and sluices and to secure them against destruction in the annual floods

Even health care was provided for.

“On the further side of Jotiya’s house and on this side of the Gamani tank he likewise built a monastery for wandering mendicant monks, and a dwelling for the ajivakas and a residence for the brahmans, and in this place and that he built a lying-in shelter and a hall for those recovering from sickness.”

“Ten years after his consecration,” concludes The Mahavamsa, never hesitant to call a spade a space, “did Pandu Kabhaya the ruler of Lanka establish the village-boundaries over the whole of the island of Lanka.”

THREE

The Great Inheritance

To claim to rule "the whole island" might have been stretching things a bit, but probably only a bit.

Certainly Pandu Kabhaya ruled a lot of the island, an achievement that was nothing short of phenomenal. As the ancient Athenians were putting the finishing touches to the Acropolis and the nascent Roman Republic issuing its first tentative laws, the palaces and structures of Anuradhapura rose up through the jungle, a tropical Versailles, two thousand years ahead of Louis XIV, founded on land that betrayed evidence of human occupation going back to roughly the same time as when Solomon became king of Israel far beyond Sri Lanka's Arabian Sea.

Anuradhapura was set to become one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities – and for 1,500 years was the capital of the island state. As the Dark Ages fell across the West and society there returned to wattle and daub, the kingdom's engineering, and architectural talents, nurtured over centuries, endowed Anuradhapura with an almost inexhaustible tally of spectacular new temples, pools, stupas, gardens, palaces, and dwellings.

Credited with ending the guerrilla warfare that marked the resistance of the original island dwellers against the Vijayans, Pandu Kabhaya's reign not only brought stability but bequeathed future constancy to the island, as his own son, Mutasiva, came to the throne in 367 BCE for a reign which, though dressed in a cloak of invisibility every bit as effective as Harry Potters',

would most probably have been akin to that of a successful Continuity Candidate, reinforcing, extending and securing these most bankable of state policies, already in train. His reign was long, and he is said to have enlarged Anuradhapura creating Mahamevnawa, an enormous park noted for its flowering trees and fruits. And mindful of his dynastic obligations, Mutasiva also produced nine sons, five of whom would rule after him. Sometimes, not often, a country gets lucky, and with this father-son duet, Sri Lanka undoubtedly did. But it was to get luckier still with the arrival of Pandu Kabhaya's remarkable grandson, Devanampiya Tissa who was to initiate yet another titan step change for his nation, every bit as transformative as Pandu Kabhaya's first.

But before properly encountering Devanampiya Tissa, the hapless historian has first to negotiate the spaghetti soup that is the early Vijayan family tree. The problem begins with Pandu Kabhaya's unfeasibly long reign – some 70 years, to which must be added an uncountable youth spent tormenting and eventually killing his uncles. Such a lifespan defies all reasonable expectation of life expectancy then – or now.

Some scholars, fretting at the impossible arithmetic athleticism of the great king, helpfully suggest an extra king at this point – a shadowy name emerges from antique mists: Ganatissa, said to be a son of Pandu Kabhaya. Or was he a grandson?

Or just a royal blind alley? Did Ganatissa precede Mutasiva for a while; or inherit from him later?

It is a mystery that is never likely to be cleared up but however the family tree played out, it must have done so with pacific grace, for civil war, which had rocked the reigns of Panduvasdeva's sons, draws not even the merest whisper in the chronicles.

This period of calm government enabled the state to become increasingly centralised, and in so doing, embedded Vijayan rule and the ascendency of the Anuradhapura Kingdom across the island. Mutasiva's peaceful death, in or around 307 BCE, made clear that the Vijayans were there to stay. And lift their kingdom's game.

FOUR

Foremost in virtue and intelligence

It was fortunate that when Sri Lanka's paramount defining moment occurred, it had a king, in Devanampiya Tissa, who was talented enough to make best sense of it.

Even so, in the decades after his death, all was nearly lost by feeble heirs and violent invaders. “When a defining moment comes along,” noted that unexpected philosopher, Kevin Costner, “you define the moment, or the moment defines you.”

Devanampiya Tissa, old King Mutasiva’s second son, and Pandu Kabhaya’s grandson, is described by The Mahavamsa as being "foremost among all his brothers in virtue and intelligence".

To get anywhere close to this exceptional king, jump in a car and head to the Ambastala Stupa in Anuradhapura for there stands a modest, much weathered, armless stone statute of the king, just over six feet high, gazing out across the grand ruins and remains of the religious citadel; a statue that, argue the scholars, actually dates from very close to the death of this monarch.

Depending on which calendar you select (Gregorian, Julian, Hindu, Islamic, Seleucid, Assyrianism, Discordian or Aztec), which tribe of argumentative scholars you most favour, and frankly, whether the day is sunny or not, the dates of Devanampiya Tissa’s reign are 307 BCE to 267 BCE; or 247 BCE to 207 BCE; or something artfully woven around both possibilities. But to get into baroque foot notes about such matters is an unnecessary distraction.

The main point about this king is how he adopted, indeed co-opted, a religion for his kingdom, using it, not just for salvation – but to anchor, with ever surer security, royal authority across a reign that lasted for at least three to four long and lingering decades.

Like the Vijayans, Buddhism also came from India - and it naturalised so completely across the island that it is impossible to grasp any aspect of the country's past or present, without first comprehending the centrality of this, its main religion.

It arrived through a series of intimate stories in which faith follows friendship.

Devanampiya Tissa had struck up a pen-pal relationship with the celebrated Indian Buddhist emperor, Ashoka, the great Mauryan overlord of much of the Indian sub-continent, who was to claim, without a scintilla of modesty or restraint that "all men are my children".

Against such a royal inclusivity, Devanampiya Tissa must have counted as among Ashoka's most favoured children.

Gifts followed letters, and a missionary followed the gifts when Ashoka despatched his own son, Mahinda, to Sri Lanka in 247 BCE.

The young missionary prince was to live on the island for forty-eight years, out-living Devanampiya Tissa, and dying, aged eighty after a lifetime spent promoting Buddhism, the beneficiary of a state funeral at which his relics were interred in a stupa in Mihintale.

For it was at Mihintale that Mahinda first met Devanampiya Tissa. The king, it was said, was out hunting. Expecting a stag, the ruler instead found himself a feisty missionary.

A testing exchange on the nature of things followed, and then a sutra was preached. The rest, as they say, is history.

FIVE

An Unalterable Destiny

Immediate after the encounter at Mihintale, the conversions began.

The country's history took the most definitive turn in its long journey, becoming - and remaining to this day - a Buddhist country first and foremost, with all that this entailed.

So great were the number of conversions that the king built the Maha Vihare (The Great Monastery) in the pleasure gardens of Anuradhapura to house the growing number of Buddhist monks; and for centuries afterwards, the building was to become the centre of Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

The evidence for all this comes, of course, from The Mahavamsa Chronicle. But it is very likely that Buddhism penetrated the island much earlier. Even so, the impulse of the chronicle is certainly exact for it would have taken the backing of a king to ensure that the religion became so dominant so fast.

And, as it did so, it accrued some of the many rituals and ceremonies of the pre-Buddhist cults, especially those associated with agriculture and demons.

It also helped spread a common language and script, and with it, the power of the centre for the king was also the formal guardian of the Sanga – the religious organization.

Clearly, Mahinda, the young missionary had painted a compelling picture of his new island home in his letters home for he was soon joined by his sister, the nun, Sanghamitta.

She brought with her a golden vase in which grew a sapling of Bodhi-Tree taken from the very one under which Buddha himself is said to have attained enlightenment.

Accompanied by a number of other nuns, Sanghamitta landed in the north of the island and was met by King Devanampiya Tissa himself. The party were ceremonially escorted to Anuradhapura along a road softened with white sand.

The Bodhi sapling was planted in the Mahameghavana Grove in Anuradhapura, where it still grows.

Sanghamitta later ordained Queen Anula and the women of the court in Buddhism and stayed on in the island, promoting the religion.

She died in 203 BCE aged 79, her death prompting national mourning. A stupa was erected over her cremation site in front of the Bodhi-Tree in Anuradhapura.

The king himself built a monastery and temple caves at Mihintale, a site that over successive years grew and grew. Indeed, temple caves rapidly became the architectural hit of the time with ordinary people funding a stone mason to do all the necessary work.

Between the third century BCE and the first century CE nearly 3,000 such caves were recorded to have been made.

Other notable buildings followed: monasteries, palaces, the 550-acre Tissa Wewa water tank, still in use today; and the Thuparamaya of Anuradhapura, the county's first stupa - which enshrined the right collarbone of Lord Buddha and whose remains today stretch out over 3 ½ acres.

Devanampiya Tissa's death after a thirty- or forty-year reign brought to an end almost 200 years of Vijayan peace and prosperity.

But it had been enough. The destiny of the country was now unchangeable; and the Vijayans, despite their latest whimsical excesses and avoidable failures, would merit the accolade of being the country's greatest rulers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, hermit, and writer.

He was born in Colombo and raised, with few concessions to modernity, in India, Singapore, and the Middle East. Cornish, he gained his degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

Having worked at News Corp's HarperCollins UK as board director for various otherwise homeless departments including sales, marketing; and HarperCollins India, he ran Hachette's consumer learning division. Prior to this, he launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom bawls, bottom lines, and divas diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of hospitality teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers.

It also helps fund The Ceylon Press, set up to make Sri Lanka's rich and complicated story, a mystery to many, and a secret to most, more accessible. The Press' books, companions, podcasts, blogs, and guides are freely available at theceylonpress.com. The Press also publishes Poetry from the Jungle, a podcast that recasts the orthodox view of the world's best poets and poems.

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